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A Classic Spy Thriller Comes to Life

To a Russian, K.G.B. Offers A Taste of The Good Life

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MOSCOW — This has been a heady season for spy fiction devotees of 007 and Moscow Centre. The real world, it seemed, had decided to give the fictional types a run for their money: in the United States there were John Walker and his kin; in West Germany, Hans Joachim Tiedge and his ilk, including a secretary in Chancellor Kohl's office who defected last week with her husband; in East Germany an American officer shot dead outside a Soviet base, and in Moscow allegations from the United States Embassy that Russians had been tracing Americans with spy dust.

Now Britain has weighed in with the defection of the K.G.B. chief in London and the expulsion of 31 Soviet officials for what in diplomatic parlance is called "engaging in activities incompatible with their status." Moscow, which has usually restricted itself to token retaliation in such cases, chose this time to strike back hard, throwing out 31 British diplomats, journalists and businessmen.

Model Marxist

In outline, the incident followed the lines of the classic spy thriller — a "mole" defects and takes down the whole network. But the image of Oleg A. Gordievsky, the defecting K.G.B. officer, that emerged in London accounts provided new material for speculation about the mammoth and shadowy Soviet intelligence institution.

For example, the personality sketch compiled by The Economist, the London weekly news magazine, depicted Mr. Gordievsky as a thoughtful, cultivated, highly regarded young professional who was driven to turn informer by his frustration at the contradiction between Moscow's public, peace-loving posture and secret efforts at subversion. In working for both sides, he was portrayed as seeking to guide Britain and the Soviet Union to a more creative and cooperative relationship.

Other images, some considerably less flattering, have also emerged. What is interesting is that many of the skills and qualities attributed to him seemed to cast Mr. Gordievsky as very much the sort of man that Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, is searching for — young, independent-minded, urbane, competent.

Westerners living in Moscow have often noted that the most outspoken, best-informed and least inhibited of their contacts are frequently people reputed to be K.G.B. officials.

In an ironic extension of this perception, diplomats have often concluded that a Soviet acquaintance who acts freely, who does not display the anxiety and caution normally shown by a Russian talking to foreigners, must belong to the K.G.B.

The all-but-impregnable secrecy surrounding Soviet intelligence makes the thesis hard to test. But most diplomats presume that the agency's recruits include some of the most promising young people in the Soviet Union. It is a career that has much to attract a Russian — membership in an elite group, access to information, relative freedom to voice opinions, foreign travel, money, all served up as patriotic duty.

It is instructive that the late Yuri V. Andropov, who led the K.G.B. for 15 years, is popularly remembered with respect as an intellectual, a man of depth, and that two of the newer members of the Politburo have ties to the K.G.B. Geidar A. Aliyev rose to prominence through the ranks of the agency's organization in Azerbaijan, and Viktor M. Chebrikov is chairman of the K.G.B.

Most diplomats believe that this reflects not only the power and scope of the intelligence agency, but also the fact that its officers probably include some of the most competent members of Soviet society.

Mr. Gordievsky appears to have been one of the latter. His defection demonstrated that membership in an elite is not a guarantee of loyalty, and that the privileges offered by the K.G.B. can prove double-edged.

Many of the commentaries on the recent rash of spy reports have emphasized Moscow's high-powered efforts to acquire Western technology. A report made public by the Pentagon last week said Moscow had prepared detailed technological shopping lists for its embassies abroad, and in some years had gathered 10,000 pieces of equipment and 100,000 documents in the West. About one-fourth of the material was said to be secret or subject to export controls.

High-Level Sensitivity

Not surprisingly, Moscow has never acknowledged this function of its state security organs. But Soviet leaders have shown sensitivity to the often-repeated portrayal of their country as a backward land dependent on stolen or imported technology.

In a recent interview with Time magazine, Mr. Gorbachev acknowledged that "everyone" was anxious for access to advanced technology, and he assailed the United States for closing channels through which the Soviet Union could legally acquire it. But he also expressed pique at the contradictory images of Soviet capabilities that he said emanated from Washington.

"To substantiate increased military spending, all they do in the U.S. is talk about the fantastic achievements of the U.S.S.R. in the field of technology," Mr. Gorbachev said. "When, on the other hand, they need an excuse for prohibitive measures, they portray us as a backward country of yokels with which to trade and, moreover, to cooperate would mean undermining one's own 'national security.'"